

“And the Rockets’ Red Glare... Early Maryland Youth at War”

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Name: Chris Borowski

**Address: 623 S. Lakewood Ave.
Baltimore MD, 21224**

Age: 15

School: Calvert Hall College High School

Grade: 10th

Principal: Mr. Louis Heidrick

It has been said that the War of 1812 was one of the forgotten wars. Young men from all over fought for the freedom of their country, the United States. They fought British troops from as far away as Canada, and as close as our own Fort McHenry. Young men who should have been chasing girls, or attending school, displayed outstanding bravery and courage in the face of battle. Two of those young men were Daniel Wells and Henry McComas. Both unfortunately died in battle; however, both were credited for killing British Major General Robert Ross. The men, who fought then, were not too different than the men who serve in Iraq right now. They too are young, and they are also involved in the fight for our nation's freedom. In this essay, I will explore the lives of Daniel Wells and Henry McComas, and their killing of General Robert Ross. And finally, I will compare the lives of young soldiers in the War of 1812 to the lives of young soldiers in Iraq.

The War of 1812 was a war that pitted the United States against Britain. President James Madison was the president at the time of the war. He, along with Congress, decided to reinstate the non-intercourse policy with Great Britain. This policy banned all trade with Great Britain and France, because those countries decided to harass neutral shipping. Because of this, Britain decided to continue its blockade on New York, and also continued to follow an even harsher policy of impressments on American sailors. The British also decided to call for a blockade of other American ports as well. Eventually, President Madison saw that war was inevitable, so on June 3, 1812 he sent a message to Congress asking for a declaration of war against Great Britain¹. On June 19,

¹Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., ed., The Almanac of American History (Greenwich: Barnes & Noble, 1993) 193-202.

President Madison officially made it public to United States citizens that we were at war with Great Britain. The British invaded America on August 16, where we lost Fort Mackinac in Michigan. The United States also tried to invade and control Canada, but fails. War raged on for close to two more years until December 24, 1814, when British and American peace commissioners met in Europe to sign the Treaty of Ghent, ending the War of 1812. The war officially ended on February 17, 1815, when the senate unanimously ratified the treaty. Thousands of men from both side's died, and towns and villages all along the northern east cost were destroyed. It can also be said that the war ended just as it started, in stalemate¹.

British Major General Robert Ross was born in Northern Ireland in 1766. After graduating from Trinity College, in Dublin, at the age of 19, joined the 25th Foot and Infantry regiment. He quickly rose through the ranks, making captain, and major. After switching to the 20th regiment, he was promoted again, this time to major, and then to lieutenant colonel. He saw combat in countries such as Spain and Italy. He was awarded three gold medals, the Peninsula Gold Medal, a Sword of Honor, and thanks from the Parliament. In 1812, he was promoted to major general. Major General Ross was a "by-the-book" soldier, who had a knack for discipline, but was loved and adored by his men. After the Napoleonic Wars, he was sent to North America to command a diverse unit of 4500 men comprised of the 4th light regiment, the 21st Royal North British Fusiliers, the 44th regiment, and the 85th regiment.² He is most noted for the capture and burning of our

¹Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., ed., The Almanac of American History (Greenwich: Barnes & Noble, 1993) 193-202.

²"Local History," My Edgemere, 2002-2004, 14 Feb. 2004 <http://www.myedgemere.com/local_history/mg_ross.htm>

nation's capital, Washington D.C., in 1814. Major General Ross fought hard. He quickly rose through the ranks and was able to achieve success in many other theaters around the world.

Daniel Wells, 19, and Henry McComas, 18, were two young apprentices at the Baltimore leather trade at the time of the war. When they enlisted as privates, the two men were sent to serve in Captain Edward Aisquith's militia rifle company. On September 11, 1814, the day of the battle, Wells and McComas received a day's ration, and 36 musket shells. The two men, along with the other 3,100 men of the city's third regiment, marched onward to the modern day community of Dundalk.³ At the same time, Major General Ross, and the front men in his group, decided to have a stop at Mr. Robert Gorsuch's farm (present day intersection of Wise Ave. and North Point Blvd. in Dundalk, Md.) to have some breakfast, and to wait for the rest of the group. Major General Ross had scoffed and said he would take Baltimore "If it rains militia." Little did both groups know at the time, but that day would go down in history as an integral part of the Battle of Baltimore.²

The two leaders of the American forces in the area were Captain Edward Aisquith and Brigadier General John Stricker. They were informed by the commander of troops in the Baltimore area, Major General Samuel Smith, that an attack by the British was probable, and that they would probably move up the North Point Peninsula. Later on, Stricker received a report from scout troops confirming that a British regiment had landed

²"Local History," My Edgemere, 2002-2004, 14 Feb. 2004
<http://www.myedgemere.com/local_history/mg_ross.htm>

³"Local History," My Edgemere, 2002-2004, 14 Feb. 2004
<http://www.myedgemere.com/local_history/wells_&_mccomas.htm>

on the western side of the North Point peninsula, and that they had cover from a British fleet that was in the area. Stricker also found out that the British decided to wait and have breakfast at the Gorsuch farm. Because he was infuriated at how the British waited for the battle to come to them, he sent Privates Wells and McComas, two U.S. sharpshooters, along with 230 other men and one cannon, to take out the British threat. It was that day where Wells, McComas, and Ross met. General Ross was shot in his arm and chest, and died a short while after that. McComas was shot in the chest, and Wells was shot in the back of the head. It is unsure of who actually shot Wells and McComas, but one thing is sure; the two men were found with empty muskets lying nearby.³ The loss of Major General Ross was a defeating blow to British troops because it left British troops at a leadership advantage, but the loss of McComas and Wells were not as glorious. Maybe if the two were generals, they would have been remembered more predominantly. The British still pushed onward, and made the American troops retreat. However, this was a tactical move that would help end the battle. The U.S. had 12,000 men waiting for the British at Hampstead Hill (modern day Patterson Park), so in actuality, the British were conned into a trap.⁴ Eventually the two were dubbed Baltimore's "boy martyrs." They are currently buried beneath a monument on Gay Street.⁵ Over all, the two young men were heroes; they served their country well when

³"Local History," My Edgemere, 2002-2004, 14 Feb. 2004 <http://www.myedgemere.com/local_history/wells_&_mccomas.htm>

⁴Jack Marck, ed., Maryland, The Seventh State: A History, 2nd ed. (Maryland: Jostens Commercial Printing) 46-47.

⁵Brennen Jensen, "1812 Overtures: The New Battle of Baltimore Is Reminding Americans About the City's Finest Star-Spangled Hour," Baltimore City Paper Online 22 Sept. 1999 <<http://www.citypaper.com/1999-09-22/feature.html> >

they were called to, and they didn't give up without a fight.

Modern day soldiers in Iraq can be compared to people such as Daniel Wells and Henry McComas. They too are young, and are also far away from home in a place that is scary and dangerous. Young soldiers in Iraq have also demonstrated themselves in having exceptional courage and bravery. It could be said that the capture of Saddam Hussein is similar to the killing of Major General Ross, because a number of young men and women were involved in that operation. Young soldiers in Iraq also do not receive the recognition they deserve. Most of them won't receive a parade when they return home. On the news we hear about three soldiers being killed in a roadside bomb attack, but what we don't realize is that it isn't three soldiers, it is one soldier, and one soldier, and one soldier. We forget to paint faces on these young men who serve, and eventually pay the ultimate price.

The war of 1812 was a war that officially declared America's independence. Two young men gave the ultimate sacrifice to their country, their lives. Another man gave his country its national anthem, and also a new understanding of the word freedom. We should be proud to learn about these people, the forgotten warriors. We should be proud to learn about the forgotten warriors that we hear about each night on the news, men and women who are barely adults, giving the ultimate sacrifice for freedom. Daniel Wells and Henry McComas displayed exceptional courage and bravery. They probably knew that their mission would end fatally for the both of them, however, they extinguished any fear inside them, and did what they were called to do, and that's what makes them heroes.

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